

A SUGGESTION OF THINGS VAGUE, UNCONTROLLABLE.

Few men realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion.

The title of the show and the quote above are both from a short story by Joseph Conrad called *An Outpost of Progress*. Certain works by Conrad appeal to me because of the impressionistic descriptions that mingle physical and psychological space, and because of his focus on morality; both the morality of a society and its defective individuals. This links with my body of work from 2010, in which I explored ideas around conflict, will and the social contract. The carry-over from 2010 is overt in *Adventure* and *Apocalypso*.

Another point of reference are the motifs and style of Henri Rousseau's paintings. This body of work attempts to link these influential artists, both of whom worked at the turn of the century with one foot in the traditions of the nineteenth and the other in the modernist renewal of the twentieth. The titles of two paintings in this exhibition are based on Rousseau's own: *Surpris!* (a direct transcription) and *Le Leopard ayant faim se jette sur le Gardien*. (1905), which is a modification of the title of a work by Rousseau, including its date of execution. *Interior. Jardin des Plantes* refers to Rousseau's method of gathering inspiration for the exotic flora populating his jungle canvases. He did his research indoors. 'Interior' also refers to the psychological dimension in Conrad's novels.

I alluded earlier to the impressionistic style of Conrad. It's worth noting that both artists were interested in rendering scenes at once foreign and deeply familiar. Conrad often uses highly controlled and specific language to elucidate experiences of the elusive. He generates a mood of instability and unease without actually breaking down communicability itself. Rousseau uses a repertoire of precise marks to create stable, gentle scenes of seemingly impenetrable jungles. The balance in the paintings between, on the one hand, rationality and knowability demonstrated through the explicating style, and on the other, unease and claustrophobia depicted in sometimes violent and primal scenes, has some congruency with novels like *Heart of Darkness*, in which the reader is guided very forcefully and deliberately on a particular journey into the unknown. Whether the unknown is geographical might be debatable. The descriptions are of something fascinating yet unbearable (Conrad) or romanticising and possibly even domesticating, yet raw (Rousseau).

There is a link here with the development of my own style which, at once unconsciously and deliberately, is making steps in the direction of a suffocating unknowability. From the sparse depictions of 2007 in which every face in a group portrait functioned as a palimpsest of accrued social experience, to the dubiously buoyant *Apocalypso* of late 2013, the point has been to make obviating statements upon common experience that are, somewhat paradoxically, highly indeterminate. However, as an admixture of highly personal insight and hypothesis, depictions ultimately describe themselves, not some external reality.

Whether Rousseau's work relates to my concern with social interaction and its attendant emotions, and what significance the primates in my paintings might have, is speculative and not entirely reasoned. One could take the dense vegetation as a metaphor for the only partial penetrability of the human psyche: concealing and revealing, frustrating and (pictorially) composing. Slumber is akin to processing, and testifies to the immobilizing power of a heavy burden, or alternatively, is suggestive of primordial innocence. This series of paintings has something to do with action, or in the case of the apes an inability to act, transpiring on the cusp of civilizing linear construction and primal floridity. The figures, human or otherwise, struggle toward but fail to confront the real, their strategies doomed from the start.

Conrad based his stories to a large extent on direct experience. Rousseau's jungle series are abstracted in that they result from pure speculation upon the conditions and experiences to be encountered *out there* (always a Eurocentric perspective). Both seem to be evaluating a fear of otherness, be it external or something indefinable within. Fear and anger, key themes in the 2010 exhibition *Social Contractors*, are figured now as the confrontation with or evasion of an internal void: a vague, uncontrollable space, unknown to wisdom, generative of emotion, and forcing some into action while incapacitating others.